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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DJIBOUTI 000460

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STATE FOR AF/E, DRL HARPOLE, LABOR FOR ILAB BOB YOUNG,
LONDON AND PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

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TAGS: [ELAB](#) [ECON](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [DJ](#)

SUBJECT: KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY; GUELLEH'S LABOR POLITICS

REF: A. DJIBOUTI 380

[1](#)B. 02 DJIBOUTI 392

[1](#)C. 01 NAIROBI 2689

[1](#)D. DJIBOUTI 299

Classified By: CONOFF CHASE BEAMER FOR REASON 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Recent worker discontent in Djibouti brings the spotlight back to the subject of workers' rights in this commercial city-state. The International Labor Organization has long maligned the Government of Djibouti for its labor policies but clever manipulation of key players, strong arm tactics, and financial clout have kept a lid on this Pandora's box. Moreover, the Government has instituted a policy in recent years to install government appointed shadow unions in place of freely elected labor unions, and succeeded in efforts to fracture and weaken the legitimate labor movement. The country has witnessed worker flare-ups in two key sectors of the Djiboutian economy. Either President Ismail Omar Guelleh wants personal political recompense for his intervention in those flare-ups in light of upcoming elections, or his circle of trust has grown small and he views these outbreaks as potential security threats. End Summary.

RECENT EVENTS

[1](#)2. (C) Per ref tel A, March 13 saw public transportation shut down in Djibouti as bus drivers and bus owners protested increased fuel prices. Adan Abdou, elected Secretary General of the Djiboutian Workers Union (UDT), told Conoff that the bus drivers had been trying to unionize for some time but had been forbidden registration by the Minister of the Interior and had been pressured financially by bus owners to keep quiet. They lost patience as they saw their profit margin further diminished by a 4 DF increase per liter (approximately US\$.08 per gallon) in diesel prices.

[1](#)3. (C) President Guelleh sent a negotiating team to resolve the problem. The four member team consisted of the President's brother, Said Omar Guelleh, the President's son, Liban Ismail Omar, the National Security Advisor and Chief of Intelligence, Hassan Said Khaireh, and one of the inner circle members of the elite Republican Guard, Captain Mohamed Djama. Sources report that the 4 DF price increase was immediately repealed and that the representatives of the striking drivers were promised a return to 1998 fuel prices. Kamil Hassan, Secretary of the opposition Republican Alliance for Democracy (ARD), former International Visitor participant, and key player in the 2001 Dini-Guelleh peace accords, told Conoff that when the Mayor of Djibouti arrived at the meetings he was dismissed perfunctorily by Said Omar Guelleh and told to mind his own business. The State newspaper, La Nation, published an article on Monday, March 22nd titled "After the strike, Elections!" The article went on to comment that "the bus workers have been in a profound identity crisis for years...and suffered from real anarchy" before closing with the line that "elections for an organized union within regulations will be held on Friday, the 26th of March."

[1](#)4. (C) Port employees report that a strike by the dock workers was narrowly averted this week due to the intervention of the Chief of Service for Human Resources Houssein Kasim. Apparently tension has been brewing at the port between the aforementioned Said Omar Guelleh, Chief of Technical Service, and Dubai Ports International installed Director General, Dutch national Johannes De Jong. Guelleh has long been recognized as the de facto manager of the port and is apparently bristling at some of De Jong's efforts to gain better control of the facility. Workers, meanwhile, have a list of complaints that include the formal recognition of their labor union, some manner of medical and disability coverage, and the standardization of pay scales amongst different shifts. Adan Abdou told Conoff that the workers were prepared to strike this week when Human Resources head Kasim brought it to the attention of the Director General who agreed to a negotiating session with the workers. This, in

turn, apparently irked Guelleh who preempted the Director General with an aside meeting with the workers on March 22 to address their concerns.

LABOR BACKGROUND

15. (SBU) The Government of Djibouti has a history of trade union repression. The harassment of duly elected trade union officials as well as the establishment of shadow trade unions whose leaders are appointed by the government are chapters in what is now a decade-long saga. The ILO has restricted Djibouti's access to international conferences due to the Government of Djibouti's interference in trade union formation. Broken promises made to the ILO include reintegrating fired union members into their state positions and halting interference in union affairs with the creation of shadow unions.

16. (SBU) Per Reftels B and C, in 1999 the Government of Djibouti disbanded the duly elected Union Djiboutienne du Travail (UDT, Djiboutian Workers Union) and Union Generale Djiboutienne du Travail (UGDT, General Union of Djiboutian Workers) and held a shadow congress which elected representatives recognized by the Government. According to the "old" (read legitimate) UDT, those active in unions are regularly harassed and fear for their jobs and the safety of their families.

17. (SBU) At the end of September 2002 after pressure from the ICFTU and the USG (including discussions of workers' rights provisions under AGOA) the UDT (the largest national trade union Congress with 21 affiliates) was permitted to hold a free congress for elections. This congress was composed of both the "real" UDT and the Government "shadow" UDT. Ahmed Djama Egueh and Adan Mohamed Abdou were elected as President and Secretary General, respectively. One month later, elements of the Government held a second congress and appointed Said Mamoud Hassan, the Minister of Labor's cousin, as the President of a "shadow" UDT.

18. (C) Most recently, according to UDT Secretary Sulaiman Djama, the Government claimed that UDT Secretary General Abdou must step down due to his role as a ranking member of an opposition party. In July of 2003 the elected President of the UDT made a private accord with President Guelleh stipulating that if Abdou was removed from UDT office the Government would permit all of those union members who had previously been fired from their jobs for union activity to be rehired. This would occur despite Government officials having already committed to these actions in previous negotiations with the ILO. Abdou was publicly removed by the UDT President after a press release made by Egueh. Unfortunately for Egueh, none of the UDT member representation accept his move and while Abdou still sits for meetings, Egueh has been isolated. No one has been reemployed. The movement is fractured however, which may ultimately have been President Guelleh's goal.

GOVERNMENT VIEW

19. (SBU) The Minister for Employment and National Solidarity Mohamed Barkat Abdillahi told Regional LaborOff in October, 2003 that the only two legitimate unions in Djibouti were those elected in 1999 in the "First congress where leaders who truly represent workers took control," and those that were again re-elected in October 2002. (Note: the Government called both of these congresses and hand picked the "election" winners. End Note) The Minister believes that he has good relations with both unions and with the employers association (Note: He is one of the largest employers as he owns a large insurance company, AMERGA and a construction company, Concorde). The Minister claims that the rights of unions have always existed in Djibouti and that the main problem he faces is that certain union leaders want to remain in power forever irrespective of the wishes of the workers. He also said that he "deplores the attitude of the ICFTU-AFRO for its archaic and colonialist attitude that supports those who want to hold onto power."

110. (SBU) Regarding the Government's desire to have UDT Secretary General Abdou step down, the Minister quoted

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Article 31 of the UDT Constitution as saying that leaders of the union cannot also be political leaders. UDT representatives interpret Article 31 of their constitution to read that no UDT official can hold public office and UDT office simultaneously. They point to January, 2003 legislative elections when their second secretary was elected to Parliament on the Rassemblement Populaire pour le Progres (RPP) ballot and subsequently stepped down from his UDT post. Only after his election to Parliament did this RPP official resign his UDT post implying that Secretary General Abdou need not resign his UDT post simply because he is a ranking member of the opposition ARD.

COMMENT

11. (C) The impact of USG demarches threatening the withdrawal of AGOA participation for Djibouti have had little effect on their labor policy as Djibouti does not take advantage of AGOA benefits. The USG would have to leverage its other interests in Djibouti in order to have any real impact on Djibouti's abysmal labor record. More interesting than the standard poor worker conditions in Djibouti however is the choice of mediators recently employed by President Guelleh. One has to wonder why two members of his immediate family, his Director of National Security, and one of his personal "heavies" would be asked to intervene in an affair as mundane as a public transportation strike. Perhaps Guelleh is losing confidence in his cabinet's ability to direct effective policy or, more likely, he is looking for clear lines of credit to interest groups that he can cash in when Presidential elections occur in 2005. A third possibility is that with the recent discontent in his armed forces (see reftel d) he wanted to silence trouble quickly and thus sent in the big guns. End Comment.
RAGSDALE